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AUTHOR Payne, Eleanor R.
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ABSTRACT

The author raises some philosophical and practical objections to establishing cataloging productivity quotas. They are unlikely to have any significant impact when used as planning and evaluation tools by management. Quotas would be counterproductive in a profession that does not lend itself to quantification and places an emphasis on quality of output. (JPF)

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CATALOGING PRODUCTIVITY QUOTAS

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by

Eleanor R. Payne

IR005601

Eleanor R. Payne
Head, Catalog Department
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA 95616

CATALOGING PRODUCTIVITY QUOTAS*

Since we have scriptural sanction for assuming that "for everything there is a purpose," let us assume that the purpose of the present push for cataloging productivity quotas can be described as threefold:

1. the quotas can be used as a planning tool by management;
2. they can be used by supervisors to objectify a performance evaluation; and
3. they can be used by the individual catalog librarian as a self-evaluation tool, by providing a clear and unequivocal picture of the numerical heights to which he or she can aspire.

There is, unfortunately, a great scarcity in library literature on the question of productivity quotas, quite possibly because it is an idea whose time has passed. I shall return to this point later.

A search of industrial relations literature, however, yielded somewhat better results (to show that I'm a thoroughly modern Millie, in spite of the occupational image, this was a computer-assisted search, performed, however, by a reference librarian). The search profile used Quota/performance standard(s)/production standard(s)/work measurement/productivity/norm(s); and was coupled with professional/white collar/and librar-, the last in order to turn up either library or librarian. While the results struck considerably less than pay dirt, several interesting things emerged, including the fact that, would you believe it? industry is as obsessed with The Machine as we.

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*Talk delivered at panel discussion, Resources and Technical Services Division Cataloging Norms Discussion Group, June 20, 1977, annual conference of the American Library Association.

Of the 24 abstracts, 11 were on business and management; 10 on the computer field itself, and 3 on libraries (2 academic and 1 special, the special one being a computer library). Interestingly enough, the article on computer libraries states: "Many companies have found that they can reduce the number of subscriptions and books by setting up a computer library of technical material. A well-cataloged circulating library of such material not only reduces costs (repeat: A well-cataloged circulating library of such material not only reduces costs), but also improves the productivity of programmers, analysts, and a host of others who could benefit from the availability and use of such a facility. ... The true library approach, concerned with the maintenance, organization, cataloging, documentation and control of contents, pays immense dividends in the form of easier accessibility to information at low cost." This was the single instance of librarians being responsible for the productivity of programmers, instead of the other way around.

I won't take any more time with these, except to say that several of the authors pointed out the importance of highly-skilled professionals to productivity, and is best summarized by this statement: "If we want to increase productivity and assure high quality in white-collar corporate employment, we must turn from the machines and concentrate on people." So much for current searches.

Historically, productivity quotas have been applied to the blue-collar worker, initially for the purpose of determining how much the worker should be paid for his labor, and later, after a floor under wages had become mandatory, as an incentive to exceed the quota by harder and faster work. According to Gerald J. Matchett, in order to successfully establish productivity quotas, three conditions must be present: first, the processes of production must be substantially standardized, uniform, and repetitive; and raw materials and productive equipment must be uniform and maintained at adequate levels. Under these circumstances variations

in worker output can be assumed to be primarily attributable to variations in worker effort. Second, output must be measurable and homogenous. And third, the production cycle must be relatively brief. Matchett also cautions that incentives must be applied carefully where costly raw materials or delicate machinery are involved, because of the possibility that more will be lost through spoilage and waste than will be gained through increased speed of production.

Let us review the three points in the context of the present discussion: first, the processes of production and raw materials must be uniform. One book does not equal another book, unless one is a copy of the other, because a book is only the physical manifestation of intellectual activity, and hardly the raw material of a product, which can be thought to be the bibliographic record. As to the second point, that the output must be measurable and homogenous: as book does not equal book, so also does book not equal bibliographic record, since intervening is a series of descriptive, analytical, and organizational decisions varying in applicability and complexity, the physical manifestation of which is, for purposes of this discussion, the catalog card. We have, in other words, confused the physical product with the intellectual process that produced it, and we continue doing so. The third point, that the production cycle must be relatively brief, is what quotas or norms are all about, isn't it? But please note that even in industry there is the caveat that concentration on speed may well result in spoilage and waste, for which read, in bibliographic terms, dirty data bases.

What is it then that we are interested in measuring? In its report on the Midwinter conference held in Washington, D.C., Library Journal reported that "It

all boils down to money." And so with cataloging--what we seek is more bibliographic bang per buck. As tax-payers, let alone responsible professionals, we can hardly quarrel with that. But as responsible professionals, let us also divest ourselves of some cherished notions. It is ironic that a profession so concerned with its image (I refer you to the current literature) finds it necessary to categorize one of its components as so devoted to unnecessary detail that the real treasures of the library are languishing in arrearage rather than standing at the ready in the stacks; that nothing warms the cockles of the catalog librarian's heart like seeing books inching, or more likely, centimetering, their way through the department at something resembling glacial speed; and finally, that the way to correct this obviously outrageous situation is to impose a quota that will make one and all shape up or ship out.

I said earlier that quotas could be used as a planning tool by management, and so they can. No one individual's numerical productivity, however, could be so great that it could have any significant impact on the planning, unless that individual is in a very small library, in which case, he or she is doing so many things anyway, that a numerical breakdown would not tell much.

As a tool for evaluation, a numerical breakdown has limited value, unless, and please observe carefully while my tongue forks, unless that productivity is 3, 4, or even 500% lower than colleagues with the same amount of time to devote to cataloging. As the old popular song said, there are such things, but when there are they should be handled on an individual basis. To impose a quota on a staff that is performing effectively in order to bring to the bar of managerial justice a recalcitrant member is both unfair and in the long run, counter-productive.

As far as quotas being used for self-evaluation is concerned, I cannot imagine a professional person who would willingly measure himself or herself in terms of numbers, rather than in terms of personal pride, and meaningful contribution to what is necessarily a team effort.

My objections to a productivity quota being set are both philosophical and practical. As far as the philosophical is concerned, countability doth not accountability make. A professional's real concern is and should be primarily on quality, with quantity a by-product of quality effectively performed and maintained. Strict numerical units are no more a measure of individual performance than the number of volumes contained in any given library is a measure of the excellence of that library. As an illustration, I would ask why, if one equals one, there is so much dissatisfaction with the quality of the data base in a well-known national computerized system? People are absolutely ecstatic about the quantity!

Catalog librarians fear that since by definition a professional is one whose work is so complex and specialized that it does not lend itself to quantification, once that quantification is imposed, their work will no longer be considered professional. It is the classic Catch 22, and it needs acknowledgement before we can even begin to discuss the problem and its ramifications.

The practical objections are legion: how are the variables going to be measured? As examples, where is the pre-cataloging search being done, and with what degree of reliability? What is the nature of the collection? the size of the backlog? how are specialities divided, along subject or language lines? what is the library's policy regarding the cataloging of pamphlets? of documents? of microforms? of

media? are these handled on the basis of format or subject specialty? What is the ratio of support staff to professional staff? how are the duties divided? Etc. etc. etc.

Who will set the quota? or establish the norm? Will there be reviews testing the validity of the norms? Will they be different for academic, public, and special libraries? What system of rewards will be applied?

What happens when the emphasis shifts to numbers and the numbers become the goal? How will quality be maintained in such an atmosphere?

I said some time back that productivity quotas, in the sense that cataloging can lend itself to cost-benefit analysis, is an idea whose time has passed. We meet today in Detroit; if Motown has anything at all to teach us, and I believe it has, it is that people who become cogs in a machine retaliate by not giving a damn. Consider the fact that Volvo has dismantled its assembly line and now has teams put together a car from beginning to end; consider what makes a Rolls-Royce the wheeled dream of everyone who drives; and consider what the words "recall notice" mean in an auto-manufacturing environment and what it means in a library; in the case of the auto industry it means that they done it bad, but in a library, we done it so good that another library user found and requested the same work.

Quotas are an idea whose time has passed in another, perhaps more important, and certainly more immediate sense: networking. For the first time, individual libraries must comply with group standards--as Barbara Markuson said at another meeting here in Detroit--libraries are discovering that other libraries will be as critical of their records as they all were previously of LC's.

Perhaps the most offensive thing of all about quotas is that they are so unimaginative. There are people in the profession who have offered suggestions that would not only provide a much greater measure of job satisfaction for catalog librarians but would also provide greater service to the user of the library. Both Faye Zipkowitz and Doralyn Hickey have suggested that our organizational patterns need to be reviewed and adjusted for greater flexibility; Phyllis Richmond has suggested that perhaps we need a shift in working patterns, including what is and what is not cataloging that requires professional attention; Anne Lipow has stated that catalog librarians should also do reference work and that reference librarians should catalog. All of these are ideas whose time has come. Catalog librarians have worked long and hard at the most incredible dog work, and now that we are beginning to reap the fruits of automation, they want a bite, if you will pardon the expression.

Recently the city of Sacramento, near which I live, dedicated a statue to the Pony Express rider--there they are, horse and rider both in a lather going somewhere lickety split, and all I could think of, conditioned as I am by years of association with cataloging, was "My God, how labor-intensive can something get?" (By the way, the Pony Express was evaluated not by miles covered, but by whether the mail went through.) I hope, in years to come when all work is done by machines and all thinking is done by people, that some satisfied library user somewhere will donate money for a statue to the catalog librarian, glasses on end of nose, shoulders stooped from long years of poring over his or her work, with one hand on the National Union Catalog and the other holding down a worksheet, books piled all over the desk, with a legend engraved that says:

"In spite of the 1908, 1949, 1967 and 1978 codes,
In spite of quotas expressed in means, medians, and modes,
The books went through!"